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ABSTRACT

At Bell High School (Los Angeles, California), students have been using video cameras, computers and editing machines to create videos in a variety of forms and on a variety of topics; in this setting, video is the textual medium of expression. A study was conducted using participant-observation and interviewing over the course of one school year (August 1992 through June 1993) to understand how and what students learned in their use of video. The "reading" and "writing" of video texts by these students is viewed as an example of a new form of literacy, one that combines print, video and computer technologies, and one where composers work collaboratively to produce texts which are easily shared with an audience. A number of conclusions were derived from this study. The development of a classroom culture that supports and encourages the use of video is a key part of the overall success of the program. This culture is maintained in part through unequal distribution of student expertise which supports a small group of students with strong technical and social skills. This video culture also sustains itself through the creation of artifacts (videos) which are integrated into the curriculum, myths delivered as testimonials by teachers and students, and informal apprenticeships in technology use. The video production process allows students to develop specializations (acting, technical skills, music) and work collaboratively on projects in ways that are not common in traditional classrooms and the public nature of video text facilitates authentic assessment via the video premiere, although an informal code limits negative feedback. The premiere marks the completion of a project, serves as an inspiration to other students, lets students share their work with an audience of their peers, allows the instructor opportunities for teaching during analysis, and increases "reading" skills through shared, public analysis of texts. (Contains 10 references.) (AEF)

Composing with Images: A Study of High School Video Producers

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So I bought a .44 magnum it was solid steel cast
And in the blessed name of Elvis well I just let it blast
Til my TV lay in pieces there at my feet
And they busted me for disturbing the almighty peace
Judge said "What you got in your defense son?"
"Fifty-seven channels and nothin' on"

— Bruce Springsteen,

"57 Channels (And Nothin' On)"

Abstract

Television is the dominant cultural and educational medium of the second half of the twentieth century, and although it has been regarded by many as a largely negative influence on society (c.f. Mander, 1991, Postman, 1985), the impact and reach of television continues to expand. More than half of the homes in the United States subscribe to cable television, and about 65% own videocassette recorders (Dorr, 1990). Television, as an educational medium in schools, has been around for 40 years (Cuban, 1986; Koenig, 1969), primarily as an information delivery platform.

At Bell High School, students have been using video cameras, computers, and editing machines to create videos in a variety of forms and on a variety of topics for more than five years. In this setting, video is the textual medium of expression. I will discuss how the "reading" and "writing" of video texts by these students is an example of a new form of literacy, one which combines print, video, and computer technologies and one where composers work collaboratively to produce texts which are easily shared with an audience.

Context

Bell High School is located in the city of Bell, in southeastern Los Angeles county, and is part of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The LAUSD serves over 630,000 students and is the second largest school district in the United States. Bell High School is a year-round school with over 4200 students on three tracks. 96% of the students at Bell are Latino, and 98% qualify for the Federal student lunch program. With a published dropout rate of 40% and an environment where drugs, gangs, and violence are commonplace, Bell is like many urban schools in the United States. And like many schools, it's also not the kind of place where one would expect to find students using advanced video and computer technology. Yet over the past four years, Bell students have won more than 100 awards for their work in local, state, national, and international video competitions. Student productions include public service announcements, video essays, video poems, and music videos covering a wide range of topics such as drugs, homelessness, gangs, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, and the LA civil unrest.

The video production program is part of the English department and is taught by two teachers, Ed Murphy and Larry Stone. Ed Murphy began working with film and video about 20 years ago and now teaches 3 television production classes in addition to 2 English composition/literature classes. Larry Stone teaches 3 English classes and 2 video production classes. During the '92-'93 school year, the two teachers also offered an after school video class 4 days a week, and during the week and over weekends they loan out cameras to students.

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Methods

I spent the 1992-93 school year working with students and teachers at Bell High School to understand how and what they learned about in their use of video. I watched as they scripted, taped, directed, edited, and premiered their work, and I came to understand how the learning environment facilitated by their teachers combined a sense of community, collaboration, high standards, authentic assessment, and technology in a way that gave students real opportunities to express themselves.

I conducted this study using participant-observation and interviewing over the course of one school year (August 1992 – June 1993). I spent approximately 600 hours observing and working primarily with students in 3 television production classes at Bell High School. During the year I interviewed more than 50 students, many several times. Interviews were both formal and informal. I also interviewed both television production teachers several times each, along with the school principal. I worked with students in several ways — tutoring them on the use of a variety of computer software, helping in the production of credits for videos, acting in one production. In addition, I produced a 15 minute documentary video on the production process which all students viewed, and I developed a CD ROM of student work containing 28 videos, 28 interviews, and 28 commentaries written by the video production teachers.

Data

Data include field notes from observations of 3 video production classes 5 days a week for 16 weeks, more than 125 hours of videotape of students at all stages of the video production process, 90 interviews, written class materials, and more than 100 completed student videos.

Objectives

The ubiquity of print in US schools and society as a whole is such that we rarely consider it as a technology in the same terms as we might view television or computers. Information delivered in print form is everywhere, from street signs to tax forms to newspapers, magazines and books. However, over the past fifty years, print has gradually ceased to be the primary medium of information for many in the US. More and more, video, delivered largely via television, provides news, entertainment, and educational material to most of the US population on a daily basis. People in the US spend more time watching television — an average of 58 hours per week — than anything else except sleeping (Schrunk, 1986).

While it can be argued that the use of print as a tool for producing texts has not been fully exploited by US schools (Applebee, 1981), the use of video as a composing medium is even less widespread. Few students have opportunities to master the tools of production for video, due in part to the high cost of the technology necessary to create and edit high quality video. In recent years, costs have dropped, and video technology, like print, promises eventually to be incorporated into personal computers as a standard feature over the next few years. At that point, tools for composition of videos or more elaborate multimedia texts including print, video, graphics and animation will be available in the same way that word processing tools are presently available for the construction of print texts.

Research on written composition, while documenting some of the many ways in which print is used by students, has done little to advance our understanding of texts which consist of more than alphabetic symbols. It is one aim of this study to show that theories of written (print) composition provide a starting point for understanding composition with new technologies and new texts, but that these new tools and forms force us at the same time to reconsider the basis of our understanding of reading and writing, and to broaden our view of both process and product with regard to reading and writing.

Theoretical Framework

As print technology has evolved over 500 years, theories of reading and writing have developed to explain our use of print. Over the past twenty years, research on reading and writing has moved from a focus on error and static conceptions of texts and writing skill, to an interest in cognitive models of reading and writing processes, to an emphasis on the social nature of literacy which now permeates current research (Dyson &

Freedman, 1989). What hasn't changed much over this time is a view of reading and writing as separate from the technology of print. To a large extent, reading means reading print and writing means composing print texts. This view has remained fairly constant at a time when the technologies of video and computers give writers access to a wider range of symbol systems and allow them to create a wider range of texts.

Lemke (1989) has challenged the traditional view by positioning reading and writing within the larger domain of social semiotics. From this perspective, reading and writing are both creative, meaning-making activities. While this view may cause us to step back and see print as one part of a larger semiotic system, we need to include as texts those formed out of the wide range of symbolic systems that are available to us, for while Lemke points out the role of intertextuality in meaning-making, he doesn't expand the range of texts that readers and writers are likely to work with. These may include video games, television news, movies, computer-based multimedia environments as well as books and other print forms.

Theories of written composition have begun to explore the wide range of forms and genres used by writers, and to a lesser extent, the range of technologies available to writers. These shifts occur at a time when the computer, having already incorporated and modified the tools for print composition, is about to make tools for video production available to many writers. This convergence of symbol systems will make the range of texts discussed by Witte (1992) even greater, while at the same time changing the process of writing. Video composition currently exists as an area with mature tools evolved over twenty years, and a range of genres. An understanding of video composition techniques will help inform theories of composition, whether they refer to writing, multimedia or video, for ultimately, all of these forms will exist as part of a single environment.

Description: Video Production Process

Videos produced by students at Bell High School may take anywhere from an hour to several weeks or months to complete. As in traditional filmmaking, the process can be seen in three stages: pre-production, shooting, and post-production, but given the social context, the significance and content of these three phases is unique. Although the description that follows is linear, the production process is not. Students may move back and forth between idea and script, writing several versions of a script before showing it to an instructor, or they may use the script merely as a ticket to the production phase and spend most of their time creating the video as they shoot it. Students can also move among shooting, review, and editing as they work. Raw footage may trigger ideas about particular shots that are needed, and editing may point out gaps in a story line that need to be filled in.

Idea

The process begins with an idea and often, a genre (public service announcement, video poem, video essay, music video). The student develops the idea in a one or two paragraph written proposal which describes the aims of the piece and some of the key shots. If a PSA is chosen, the final message is usually included in this proposal. When the proposal is cleared by the instructor, the student is required to write a script describing the proposed video in detail.

Script

A script is a shot by shot description of the images and sounds for the proposed project. Here is an example from a video about AIDS:

Video	Audio
Text on black screen: I don't care about ages...	Original Music
Long shot of young male walking on sidewalk	
Close up of infant in hospital crib	
Close up of elderly female, sitting	

The shot description includes what is on the screen and the kind of shot (close-up, long shot). Often, the camera angle or camera movement (e.g., side view of people walking.) is included. Despite the apparent level of detail required for a script to pass the script review, there can be a considerable difference between the video as

described in the script and the video as shot and edited.

Script Review

The script review is a meeting between instructor and student producer or producers. The written script serves as a "shared space" where teacher and student(s) collaboratively work out the details of the proposed video. This meeting is the major obstacle that must be cleared before students move into the production phase and start working in the visual medium. When a script presents difficulties that cannot be resolved through additional oral description by the student or through acceptance by the student of an interpretation by the instructor of the written text, the script is held for revision. Additional script reviews are often necessary (up to 10 times in some cases) before production may begin.

Shooting

The production phase of the project involves shooting and reviewing video footage. The role of the primary producer here (generally the script writer but in some cases the group leader) may be singular — directing each shot — or involve acting, camera work, and directing all at the same time. The Orson Welles approach (write-act-direct) is actually more common than the Martin Scorsese approach (write-direct), and the scriptwriter who doesn't direct is almost nonexistent. Specialists in acting, camera and post-production work are common though, and work crews who stay together over several productions often develop around these roles.

In some cases, no shooting takes place at all. Instead, students use existing footage to produce their video. Most commonly they search the Video Encyclopedia of the 20th Century for shots by topic, gather the shots and then proceed to edit their video. In other cases, videotapes or live television broadcasts are used as the primary source of footage. Occasionally, footage is borrowed from previous student projects. Students may also combine existing and live footage in their work.

Review

When live footage is being shot, the process usually extends over several days or weeks depending on the length of the script and other factors related to the availability of actors or equipment, the location and time (night/day) of the shots or students' access to areas outside the classroom during the school day. At the end of each shooting period or sometimes during the process and after each shot, students review their footage either with a VCR and monitor or right in the camera. In concert with the review process, students sometimes log their footage to speed up the editing process. In some cases, the review process may end at the close of a class period with the tape advanced only part of the way through the footage, resulting in a loss of footage the next day when shooting resumes and the tape is not checked prior to shooting.

Editing

Editing takes place in a room attached to the main television production classroom. Two editing suites are available, but one consists of an older system that offers no special effects, so it is rarely used at all and almost never used for a final production. (I counted no completed videos done on this system during the 92-93 school year.) The process of learning how to edit is not a formal part of the classroom instruction offered by the teacher. Opportunities to edit arise as students accumulate footage during the production phase, and in some cases the teacher may sit down with a student or students and go through the editing process step by step. This does not happen for every production however, so students more commonly learn how to edit by working with an experienced student and observing them as they work or enlisting their help in completing a project.

Special Effects

Special effects are a part of almost every production at Bell High School. As one instructor put it, students describe videos which do not employ effects as "cheap." Basic effects such as "painting" the video image, changing the color (generally to black and white), or strobing the moving images are available through a special

effects board attached to the edit controller. A more extensive library of transitions, effects, and titling is accessible through an Amiga computer equipped with a Video Toaster board. Operation of the Toaster involves the use of a complex software/hardware combination which only a few students have mastered. These experts also tend to be the most skilled editors and often get involved with projects done by other students as helpers at the editing table. In some cases, these students serve primarily as technicians for other students who have a clear vision of what they want. In other cases, the technical assistant may become more involved in the decisions (editing, use of effects, selection of shots) which shape the final video.

Music

Students generally use popular music for the video soundtrack. In many cases, the song is chosen specifically to fit the message of the video. The connection between the song lyrics and the student's message may be very strong or at a more abstract level. In some cases, songs that are narratives may be the basis for the script as well as the message.

During the '92-'93 school year, one student provided original music for several videos. Working with the student producers, he would either compose at a keyboard while watching the video or watch the video several times and create the music at home. The finished soundtrack would then be added to the videotape using editing equipment. In some cases, videos were done initially with a popular song before original music was created. Here, the producers tended to choose music which set a particular mood, then have the student musician create something similar.

Video Premiere

The final event in the video production process is the premiere. When the student has completed the video, it will be shown to each of the 3 video production classes, starting with the class in which the student producer is enrolled. The premiere begins with a brief introduction delivered by the student producer, often detailing the difficulties encountered during the project (actors didn't show up, shots were lost, etc.), describing the personal nature of the video (family member involved in gangs or drugs; personal experience with topic of video), providing a testimonial regarding the extensive help given by other students to help complete the project ("I really have to thank ..."), or pointing out the swiftness of the production ("It took 2 days, really. One day to shoot and 2 hours to edit." Often the length of the production is shortened in this introduction or is described in terms of actual working days rather than calendar days. In the case of many first time producers, no introduction is offered.

The tape is put in the VCR, the lights go out, and the video begins. Darkness tends to prohibit students from engaging in other activities while the video plays, so in general most student eyes are focused on the television screen. In many cases, at the conclusion of the video, spontaneous applause is offered by the class. At other times, if the video does not appear complete no applause is given. In all cases, the instructor begins the discussion with "Say something good about this video." This invitation encapsulates one of the primary goals of the class from the instructor's perspective, to help students succeed and feel good about what they have done. Student praise is generally authentic or not given at all and may focus on general characteristics - "I liked the shots; The music was good; The credits were cool; It was tightly edited," or more specific elements such as the composition of a particular shot - "The shot from the car in the drive-by scene was really cool." Sometimes the praise is offered with a recommendation, as in "That was a good shot but it was a little too long. I think you could have cut it." Once the "good" comments are exhausted, the instructor asks "What could you change about this video to make it better?" Here student response is a little freer than in the praise segment of the reaction where certain elements are generally safe to mention - music, editing, acting. If the student producer is present, negative comments are normally offered with quite a bit of qualification to lessen their impact, or they are not offered at all. The exception here is when the commentor is a good friend of the producer and may offer constructive criticism more directly.

Almost all videos are shown twice, with the same discussion pattern following the second showing with the additional invitation by the instructor, "Did you notice anything that time that you didn't see the first time?" In addition, before the second showing, the instructor may point out specific elements such as camera angle or movement, shot selection, special effects, or editing that he considers particularly noteworthy. Noteworthiness

is often related to creativity, so if a new technique has been used for the first time or a different approach to a particular topic is employed, the instructor may point it out.

Following the premiere, most videos are complete. Traditional video editing equipment can be compared to typewriters in the writing process — easy to add on at the end of a text, but very difficult to change anything in the middle. As a result, even if feedback from the video premiere has presented the student with suggestions that might improve the video, these are rarely incorporated into a second edit of the project. In some cases, the audio may be changed, but this process does not require that the video track be modified. When there is the possibility that a video might need reediting, it may be offered to the class as a work in progress, with the stated goal of the premiere to solicit feedback before proceeding with further editing.

The premiere is rarely the first real showing of the video as it has evolved during editing and may have been seen by the instructor at several stages of the editing process. In such cases, individual shots and sequences may have been changed before the video is judged to be complete, but due to the difficulty in performing edits in the middle of completed video, the project generally evolves in a strictly linear process.

Conclusions

The development of a classroom culture that supports and encourages the use of video is a key part of overall success (however measured) of this program. This culture is maintained in part through the unequal distribution of student expertise which supports a small group of students with strong technical and social skills. The group is kept small primarily due to the limited amount of technology available. Unlike computer expertise, many video skills must be developed at school with equipment not available at home. The highly skilled students must develop strong social skills along with technical knowledge (contrast with "computer nerd" culture) in order to learn and complete projects. Team players can do more with video.

This video culture also sustains itself through the creation of artifacts (videos) which are integrated into the curriculum, myths delivered as testimonials by teachers and students, and informal apprenticeships in technology use. Success fosters success as the work of previous classes is used to set high standards for current students. As technology and students have changes, so has the teaching that supports this video culture. Instructional style has evolved over more than 20 years and is marked by willingness to experiment, ability to facilitate rather than instruct, and increasing the intellectual freedom available to students. This style puts both teacher and students in frequent conflict with administration which favors control and status quo in what is perceived as a potentially dangerous environment.

The video production process allows students to develop specializations (acting, technical skills, music) and work collaboratively on projects in ways that are not common in traditional classrooms and the public nature of the video text facilitates authentic assessment via the video premiere, although an informal code limits negative feedback. The premiere serves multiple purposes — marks the completion of a project, serves as inspiration to other students, lets students share their work with an audience of their peers, allows instructor opportunities for teaching during analysis, increases "reading" skills through shared, public analysis of texts.

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